DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 158 CS 502 833

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TITLE The Communication of Sex-Role Images in Popular Magazines.
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (65th, San Antonio, TX, November 10-13, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; Media Research; *Periodicals; *Sex Differences; *Sex Role; Student Attitudes; *Student Reaction

ABSTRACT

A study to formulate a communication model by which sex role images are projected by magazine publishers and to test the implications of this model involved 321 college students enrolled in various communication classes. The students rated magazine covers on a seven-point scale that measured their degree of interest in reading each magazine. Results confirmed that clusters of magazines reflected sex role images, that males and females differed in their evaluation of magazine clusters, that men's responses to magazines indicated a unitary dimension of the male sex role image, and that women's responses to magazine covers revealed traditional versus nontraditional sex role images. (Author/AEA)

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THE COMMUNICATION OF SEX-ROLE IMAGES IN POPULAR MAGAZINES

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Paper presented at Mass Communication Interest Group, Western Speech Communication Association Convention, Portland, 19 February, 1980.

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Magazines constitute a massive communication system in the United States--a network, moreover, whose recent expansion has attracted the attention of media analysts.[1] Indeed, it has been estimated by the Magazine Publishers Association that more than 300 new magazines appeared in one recent year alone.[2]

Each magazine producer sponsors an elaborate program of research to assess the consumer market, enabling it to adjust to the needs of the target audience. Using demographic and psychographic information, the publisher attempts to communicate relevant messages to the potential buyer through various channels, one of which is the magazine's cover. As Wilson Bryan Key stated in *Subliminal Seduction*, "For many national magazines, the cover, literally an advertisement of the packaging for the magazine--is the most critical page in the book. The cover must sell the magazine."[3]

The magazine's cover projects an image aimed at a specific type of individual. The selection of this image is not an accident, but is based on a highly-sophisticated communication. Replacing the historical evolution of the image as, "a trademark, a design, a slogan, or an easily remembered picture," the contemporary image represents, "a studiously crafted personality profile of an individual, corporation, product, or service."[4]

One type of image that magazines project through their covers conveys gender identity. The most obvious examples of this are the male-oriented magazines, such as *Playboy, Penthouse*, etc., and the female-oriented ones, such as *Glamour, Vogue*, etc. A casual glance at the places where these magazines are typically sold indicates an awareness of the audience. Male-oriented magazines are prominant in liquor stores and "porn" shops; female-oriented ones dominate supermarket displays.

While it is apparent that magazine publishers spend a great deal of money researching the kind of readers they hope to attract, there is less information on the commonalities which they share with other magazines.

For example, one wonders whether there is a high correlation among readerships. To what extent do readers select magazines out of habit and past experience--or is the psychological image more important in directing their interests? A conceptual model is presented below which summarizes the steps involved. The publishers create an image of their magazine based on presumed or assessed characteristics of their target audience, and the image is projected through the magazine cover, a vehicle of message transmission.

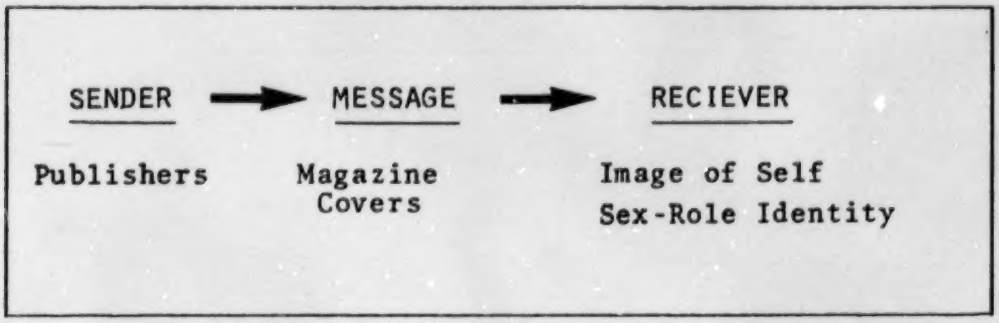

Figure 1. Theoretical model showing relation between publishers and characteristics of readers.

It is proposed that the failure or success in reaching the intended receiver is largely a function of two intrapersonal characteristics: (a) image of self and (b) sex-role identity. The first concepts refers to the way one perceives oneself in terms of values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, or reference groups. The second, sex-role identity, refers to the internalization of cultural standards relating to sex-role. Sex-role identity varies in style of role enactment, as well as in its centrality for the self concept. Research on the psychology of adolescence has further indicated that sex role plays a contrasting function for males and females. That is, while the boy's adolescent identity is focused on his future vocational choice, the girl orients her future around her image of adult feminine life styles.[5]

The empirical investigation of response to magazine covers offers a unique synthesis of a practical mass communication paradigm with implications for the image of self and sex-role identity. It is also noted that response to magazine covers constitutes an overt behavioral commitment--specifically, that one would like to read that magazine. Ratings reflect the disposition to respond as a result of a communicated message. Finally, the methodological decision to use magazine covers, as opposed to merely listing magazines, permits subjects to utilize all visual and verbal information contained in the original communication.

In an earlier phase of the present research, photographs of 25 magazine covers were presented to 200 participants.[6] Factor analysis was used as a procedural step to establish categories of magazines, but much of the factor structure was difficult to interpret. For example, one dimension was defined by precisely two magazines--*Psychology Today* and *Ms.*! Nevertheless, the initial factor was one related to masculinity and femininity. Men's magazines (*Playboy, Penthouse,* and *National Lampoon*) were viewed as the opposite of women's ones (*Family Circle, Better Homes and Gardens, Good Housekeeping, Glamour,* and *Redbook*). In short, men's erotic magazines--with a little humore thrown in--were opposite of homemaking and beauty.

To further explore the meaning of male-oriented and female-oriented magazines, a more extensive study was designed, with special effort to include a range of magazines pertaining to sex-role images. Based on the findings of the study cited above, the following hypothese were made.

1. Clusters of magazines will reflect sex-role images projected by the publishers.
2. Males and females will rate these clusters differently.
3. Men's responses to magazines will reveal a unitary dimension of the male sex-role image.
4. Women's responses to magazines will reveal multiple sex-role images.

The Study

Magazine Covers

A total of 55 magazines were selected on the basis of pilot data and the systematic attempt to include magazines with sex-role images or with implicit notions of male interests (e.g., sports, cars, science, outdoors, etc.) or female interests (food, interior decorating, social events, fine arts, etc.). Several additional categories of special interest magazines were included, such as those reflecting current events, movie magazines, health care, religion, book reviews, human behavior, and some of the older-styled general interest magazines, such as *Saturday Evening Post*. The current issue was purchased from the newsstands or taken from the library shelf in early summer 1978, and its cover was photographed for presentation as a 35mm slide.

Procedures

Three hundred and twenty-six students (128 men and 198 women) enrolled in courses at a state university were asked to participate in a study regarding their preferences for popular magazines. The classes included six sections of Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, seven sections of Fundamentals of Public Communication, a class in Educational Psychology, and a seminar in Female-Male Communication. The following instructions were given:

> "You are going to see a series of magazine covers presented as slides. For each one, please indicate on your rating scale the degree to which you would like to read or would not like to read this magazine. Do this by circling a number from '1' (not like to read at all) to '7' (like very much to read). If you have no response to the magazine, consider how likely you might be to pick it up in a friend's house, doctor's office, or from the newsstand--and rate it in the same way. Please do not skip any."

Each slide was presented for an 11-second duration; presentation order was counterbalanced by reversing the sequence for half the classes randomly.

Results and Discussion

Sex-Role Image

Examining the magazine ratings, sex differences were clearly apparent. Men assigned highest ratings to *Playboy* (mean 5.48), *Sports Illustrated* (mean 5.48) and *Time* (mean 5.45); women selected *People* (mean 5.66), *Glamour* (mean 5.60) and *Newsweek* (mean 5.58). As anticipated, one of the most obvious facts about magazines is their male-oriented or female-oriented nature, although news magazines elicited the interest of college students of both sexes.

The hypothesis that clusters of magazines would reflect sex-role images projected by the publishers was evaluated through use of factor analysis (see Table 1). Scores for men and women were combined in this analysis, although 64 women were deleted at random to equate the sex ratio. The initial factor was composed of women's magazines, headed by *Glamour*, *Vogue*, and *Seventeen*.

Men's magazines appeared in Factor 3, a set of magazines which included *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Forum*, and *Gentleman's Quarterly*. Moreover, as was also the case for women, a magazine rated highly was the one with the highest loading on the sex-role factor: *Playboy* for men and *Glamour* for women. The men's cluster was somewhat smaller than that for women, both in terms of the number of magazines and the percentage of variance for which it accounted. This was partly due to the inclusion of fewer men's magazines in the study, but also appears related to the fact that home-interest magazines were grouped with the women's sex-role image.

When the factor analyses were conducted separately for each sex, there are some notable differences from the combined analysis. Most importantly,

in both the women's and the men's analysis women's magazines fell into two clusters. The traditional one consisted of *Vogue, Glamour, Seventeen, Cosmopolitan,* and *Viva*, thus indicating beauty, fashion, and enotic interests. The nontraditional grouping revealed five magazines: *Working Woman, Prevention, Ms., Psychology Today, New Woman,* and *Women Sports.* Of this latter series, four reflect a female emphasis in their titles, while the remaining pair were interest magazines: *Psychology Today* and *Prevention.* Nevertheless, when men constructed a nontraditional role cluster for women, the list was more exclusively female, and the order shifted slightly: *Ms., Women Sports, Working Woman, New Woman,* and *Redbook.*

Likewise, when men alone created a masculine cluster, two interest magazines, *National Lampoon* and *Rolling Stone*, were added to the men's set. Women, in contrast, substituted *Gentleman's Quarterly* for the interest magazines in the men's cluster. Thus, each sex alone tends to include interest magazines in their sex-role cluster--magazines which do not appear gender-linked to the opposite sex. *Rolling Stone* and *National Lampoon* emerge as central to the male college student's identity, while *Prevention*, a health magazine, and *Psychology Today* are integral to the image of the nontraditional woman.

Ratings of Magazine Clusters

Returning to the original factor analysis for both sexes, ratings from the eight major clusters were compared in a three-way analysis of variance using sex of subject, age, and university class. As shown in Table 2, for the six clusters with no explicit gender referent, five of them revealed significant differences in the ratings by men and women ($p < .01$). Men showed a significant preference for sports, science, and business magazines, while women preferred contemporary living and celebrity magazines.

Conclusions and Implications

Social scientists have devoted a great deal of attention to the issue of sex-role identity and to techniques for measuring an individual's sex-role image. The present study has validated the use of popular magazines as a method for examining the centrality of sex-role images in publisher's communications. Nevertheless, the assumption that the reader "identifies" with this image has not been tested. Further research might be directed toward assessing the degree to which an individual's own image coincides with the publisher's constructed image. Another issue concerns whether the participant actually would like to read a given magazine, or whether he or she merely believes that someone like him- or herself ought to enjoy that magazine. It would also be interesting to examine the relation of other subject characteristics, such as values, sex-role attitudes, degree of self-actualization, or androgyny scores, to magazine preferences. These questions remain for future research.

Notes

[1]"The New Life," The MacNeil/Lehrer Report, WNET New York, 25 September, 1978.

[2]Robert MacNeil, Ibid., p. 5.

[3]Wilson Bryan Key, Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media's Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America (New York: New American Library, 1973), p. 16.

[4]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide To Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 16.

[5]Elizabeth Douvan and Joseph Adelson, The Adolescent Experience (New York: Wiley, 1966).

[6]Alice Sheppard, "The Relationship between Cartoon Preferences and Magazine Choice: Implications for Sex Role." Paper presented at Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1979.

Appreciation is expressed to Dr. David Natharius for his assistance in making this study possible and in conceptualizing the theoretical issues from a communications framework.

Table 1

Rotated Factor Matrix with Ratings for both

Males (N = 128) and Females (N = 130)

Factor 1 - Women's Magazines

Glamour	.87
Vogue	.86
Seventeen	.84
New Woman	.84
Redbook	.80
Viva	.68
Cosmopolitan	.66
Working Woman	.65
Better Homes & Gardens	.64
Ms.	.62
House Beautiful	.56

Factor 2 - Business Magazines

Business Week	-.79
Money	-.74
Fortune	-.72
Bookviews	-.58
Esquire	-.47

Factor 3 - Men's Magazines

Playboy	.81
Penthouse	.79
Forum	.73
Gentleman's Quarterly	.43

Factor 4 - Sports & Outdoors Magazines

Outdoor Life	-.76
Field & Stream	-.73
Sports Illustrated	-.73
Road & Track	-.66
Popular Science	-.42

Factor 5 - Science Magazines

Natural History	-.72
Scientific American	-.70
National Geographic	-.64
Popular Science	-.56

Factor 6 - News Magazines

Newsweek	.83
Time	.76

Factor 7 - Contemporary Living

Gourmet	.64
Art News	.63
House Beautiful	.59
Country Gentleman	.50
Better Homes & Gardens	.49
Modern Maturity	.47
Sunset	.44

Factor 8 - Celebrities & People

Us	-.73
People	-.47
Saturday Evening Post	-.47

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Magazine Categories

Magazine Category	Males (N = 128)	Females (N = 198)
Women's Magazines	2.47	5.35**
Glamour, Vogue, Seventeen, New Woman, Redbook		
Business Magazines	3.50*	3.10
Business Week, Money, Fortune, Bookviews, Esquire		
Men's Magazines	4.72**	3.30
Playboy, Penthouse, Forum, Gentleman's Quarterly		
Sports	4.38**	2.93
Field & Stream, Sports Illustrated, Outdoor Life, Road & Track		
Science	3.73*	3.31
Natural History, Scientific American, National Geographic, Popular Science		
News	5.40	5.53
Newsweek, Time		
Contemporary Living	3.12	4.54**
Gourmet, Art News, House Beautiful, Better Homes & Gardens, Sunset		
Celebrity	4.52	5.12**
US, People, Saturday Evening Post		

** $p < .001$
* $p < .01$